

SPSL / A–Y (revised)**susan pui san lok**, Middlesex University**Abstract**

97 Proofs – After Words – Altar Notes – Art Vapours – Awards – Chorus / Mobile Chorus – Citius, Altius – DIY Biennale/Ballroom/Live – Faster, Higher – FCHKUK – Five/Six Women – Golden (Ballroom/Hour/Lessons/Notes/Songs/Vistas/Years) – Lean To – Lightness – Making Ways – Mobile Ballroom – Mobile Chorus – Monumental Bargain – NEWS/REEL – RoCH Fan / RoCH Fans & Legends / Trailers / Trilogies – Witness

SPSL / A to Y (revised) offers a partial and a-chronological index of my practice across moving image, installation, performance and text over some twenty years – less a narrative of progression or arrival, than one of sometimes awkward returns. In relation to the notion of ‘(In)Direct Speech’ *A–Y* might also be seen as a series of momentary tactics that speak directly and indirectly to ideas and contradictions of ‘Chineseness’.

Keywords

contemporary art

moving image

Chineseness

British/Chinese

diaspora

diasporic

Introduction

As an a-chronological introduction to my practice across moving image, installation, performance and text of the last twenty years, the partial narrative that follows is less an account of progression or arrival ('from here to there' or 'how I got here'), than one of sometimes awkward returns and circuitous moves ('here I am again'). Given the limits of space, I will touch briefly on a number of projects, highlighting three: *Golden* (2005–), *Faster, Higher* (2008) and *RoCH Fans & Legends* (2013–). There are objects/events/gestures that may be seen/read/heard as a series of tactical speech acts. If a tactic is 'a calculated action determined by an absence of a proper locus' (Chow 1993: 16), then 'Chineseness' might here constitute both an absence and an improper locus – 'Chineseness' as an enduring habitus or set of embodied 'transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990: 53) that is nevertheless mutable and potentially generative, a negotiable and contradictory trajectory of localities and vocalities.

Moving between archives and Astroturf, ballrooms and Cantopop, pole-vaulters and martial arts, 'Chineseness' is 'spoken' with accents, in the sense of both 'inflection' and 'stress': diasporic inflections amid parochial encounters with the 'global', with stresses on the disembodied, dislocated and perpetual cultural lag.

97 Proofs (1998)

Ninety seven declarations, provocations, accusations: the tongue-in-cheek sum of a cultural predicament, personal and political. Collected and concocted after returning to Hong Kong, for Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty, these half-found, half-fabricated slogans reference both the thriving trade in fake goods and the ubiquity of handover souvenirs. *97 Proofs* plays on

colonial clichés and imperial sentiments, exoticizing and orientalizing impulses, and responds with wilful inauthenticity to expectations to bear witness to the ‘Historical Moment’ (see *Witness* 1998).

***After Words* (2005)**

Re-photographed details from a family album: night visions, dream scenes, sleep images of lost gestures and traces – proofs again – of precarious genealogies, tenuous relations and anonymous kin.

***Altar Notes* (2012)**

A partial script for an unmade film, performed as a micro-play at the Yuen Long Theatre in the New Territories, Hong Kong, on the fifteenth anniversary of the handover.

Fifty years after leaving Hong Kong for England, three generations prepare for the opening of the once-neglected, now-restored, ancestral altar. What does it mean to care for ancestors – or ancestry – at increasing removes, and increasingly mediated ways?

***Art Vapours* (2014–)**

An occasional collaboration with J. C. Kristensen (see *Six Women* 2015).

***Awards* (2006)**

See *Golden* (2005–).

***Chorus/Mobile Chorus* (2006/2014)**

See *Golden* (2005–)

***Citius, Altius* (2012)**

A single-channel version of *Faster, Higher* (2008).

***DIY Ballroom / Live* (2007)**

An outdoor public screen commission with live events, featuring amateur ballroom dancers online and in the streets. Performing iterations of ‘English’, ‘Modern’ and ‘International’ styles or ‘standards’, simultaneous yet asynchronous and heterogeneous, (DIY) ballroom presents as an enduring global phenomenon that evokes untold social and cultural aspirations.

‘Diasporic’ rather than ‘diaspora’. Alexandra Chang and Alice Jim refer to the ‘broad conceptualization of the Americas as a complex system of continual movement, migratory flows and cultural transmission’ (2015: 1–14), citing Lok CD Siu: ‘the noun “diaspora” often connotes a stable object, a static collectivity with assumed and unchanging sets of identifications and connections’, while its adjectival form, ‘diasporic’ emphasizes ‘the processual nature of producing diaspora subjectivities’ (2005: 11). What happens if we displace both ‘diaspora’ and ‘the Americas’ with ‘China’? Can we stress the processual nature of producing ‘Chinas’ and ‘Chineseness’, in complex and continual motion, with shifting identities and connections?

***Faster, Higher* (2008)**

A five-screen installation commissioned to coincide with the Beijing Olympics, comprising Olympic archive material and rarely seen Chinese documentary footage spanning the last century, with new footage shot at the East London Wushu Academy.

China's absence from the Olympics between 1952 and 1984 points to disputes over the political status of 'China' – and by extension, 'Chineseness' – and the multiple claims made to its name. From 1932 to 1948, China competed under the 'Republic of China' (ROC); in 1952, China under the Communist Party competed under the 'People's Republic of China (PRC). In the same year, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) allowed both the PRC and the ROC (relocated to Taiwan), to compete, thus prompting China's withdrawal in protest. In the intervening period, Taiwan under the ROC continued to participate in the Olympics, with China finally ending its boycott after the IOC passed a resolution that the ROC be designated 'Chinese Taipei'. In the meantime, Hong Kong has competed since 1952 under a distinct National Olympic Committee; post-1997, its Special Administrative Region (SAR) status is denoted in the appended name, 'Hong Kong, China'.

However, the visual and cultural rhetorics of China's National Day celebrations and sports festivals over this period suggest commonalities and resonances with the avowedly apolitical Games, in terms of notions of nation and sport, patriotism and physical endeavour.

Faster, Higher opens with the rituals and symbols of national ceremony and international unity, flags jostling along a succession of parades, processions punctuated by the release of doves and balloons. Colour bars and countdowns signal different kinds of 'standards' or 'universals' in language, implicating the entwined histories of the Olympics and the moving image, as well as archival points of entry. The Olympic rings are echoed through clocks, archers' targets, lassoes, and gymnasts' hoops; while the ascent of balloons and lanterns, pole-vaulters and mountaineers, invoke the movement's motto: *citius, altius, fortius*.

New footage of young and diverse *wushu* practitioners training at the periphery of the London 2012 site, signal personal aspirations and complex cultural affiliations, as well as alluding to

national and international ambitions – Beijing’s campaign for *wushu* to be recognized as an Olympic sport is ongoing.

FCHKUK (2000)

An installation in the artist-run gallery Stuff, London, with ‘SPSL’ badges, bedcovers, Françoise Hardy on audio, and a remixed scene from Wong Kar Wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994).

From the nominal to the adjectival and acronymic, I reprise my sometime idealistic and ironic gesture towards the in-process, unstable, provisional nature of naming:

Susan Pei San Lok. Susan P-E-I, S-A-N, two words, no hyphen, Lok, L-O-K. Or Lok3 Pui3 Saan1... Or Luo4 Pei4 Shan1... Or Susan, Lok3 Pui3 Saan1... Or Susan Lok. Or Susie / Sue, or Su-without-an-e. Or Susan Pui San Lok – Pui San – two words, P-U-I, S-A-N. Or Susan, Lok3 Pui3-hyphen-Saan1... Or Susan Pui San (one word, no hyphen) Lok... Or Susan, Luo4 Pei4 Shan1... Or susan pui san lok... (1996)

Many will be familiar with the ad hoc Romanizations, Anglicizations and ‘corrections’ of name imposed, demanded or volunteered in the process of acclimatizing or assimilating to specific linguistic, social and cultural contexts. Turning and tuning between visible/audible and invisible/inaudible registers; passing unseen/unheard, or amplified through hyphen-/slash lenses; privileged and encumbered by ethno-/national distinctions and geo-cultural-/political divisions; mis/taken for Hong Kong-/British-/English-/Chinese-/Japanese-/Singaporean-/Malaysian-/ -/-/-/-/

The hyphen-/slash, conjoined or absent, explicitly or implicitly troubles the other. Hyphenation as a space and gesture of inclusion, offers a tenuous bind or hold. While the slash or

solidus presents a challenge as ‘it turns (its back)’ on the hyphen. The slash effects both a split – it ‘implies a choice between more than two terms’ – and at the same time a confrontation (Chang and Jim 2015). Splitting and turning, ‘British/’ and ‘Chinese/’ turn on and confront both Anglicizing and Sinicizing discourses, ‘[refuting] hyphenated nationalisms and conflicting sovereignties, underlining circulations and motion’. Eileen Chang asks,

Hyphen or slash? I think what matters may be less the choice to hyphenate or not to hyphenate than the relationship between the signifiers... these markings both and/or either reveal and/or conceal: conjuncture and rupture, an exorable pressure to assimilate or the impossibility of assimilation, a permanent suture and/or an impermeable barrier interposed between presumably distinct racial-national formations. (2007: 12)

Notwithstanding historical, political and cultural differences and specificities of distinct colonial and imperial pasts, we might bear in mind the conjunctures, ruptures, alternations and slippages, not only between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ and ‘British’ and ‘Chinese’, but also between ‘Black’ and/as ‘Asian’, and ‘Wo/Man’ – each hyphen-/slash demanding a reconfiguration and transgression of id/entities and imaginaries.

Five Women (2015)

A digital portrait of women speaking, in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972; see also *Six Women* 2015).

Golden (Vistas, Songs, Years) (2005–)

Golden is a multi-stranded project that began to take shape in the triangular space temporarily opened up between London, Hong Kong and San Francisco, during an autumn in the Bay Area. An experimental search for a critical, diasporic aesthetics, that might somehow evoke the movements and co-temporalities of languages, cultures, histories and subjects in flux. An imaginative space where aspirations to ‘settle’ and ‘return’ might not be contradictory; and ‘nostalgia’ might be mobilized in more complex ways than a ‘backward’ gaze; nostalgia as ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement, but is also a romance with one’s own fantasy’ (Bohm 2007: 7).

In *Vistas* (2005) the Golden Gate Bridge appears as an iconic emblem of possibility and prosperity; a wonder that stands also for despair (it is a renowned suicide landmark). High up in the Berkeley Hills across the bay, the threshold, gateway and portal appears both concrete and elusive, at turns shadowy and solid; shrouded by clouds or skimming sheet-metal waters. Aloft – cool and distant, an elevated vantage point – the bridge melts into the air. On water, hard structural edges come into view; on foot, the shore dissolves and returns with folds of water and foam.

From London, *Songs I, II, III* (2005) offered a disconnected soundtrack to *Vistas* – short audio pieces compiled from sung instances of the word ‘golden’, rearranged to produce several condensed interludes, at once plaintive, joyful and wistful. *Songs IV* (2014) and *Songs V* (2015) followed in Montreal and Guangzhou, with nominated tracks from local artists, performers and curators.

Years (2006) is a two-screen projection comprising 50 short sequences spanning five decades, juxtaposing ballrooms and allotments as spaces of ‘cultivation’; the stylized moves of different forms of cultural display; the language of contact improvisation in contemporary dance; and the

informal, habitual gestures of everyday conversation. Identity and culture as movement as language, as language in movement.

Golden (Ballroom, Lessons) (2006)

A gallery transformed by gold shimmer curtains, rose-tinted light and a vinyl collection of ballroom sounds and Cantopop. Visitors are welcome to take or give DIY lessons.

My parents arrived in Britain ten years apart, economic migrants economically stalled, culturally adrift, out of time, out of sync – waiting and dancing, waiting and cultivating. Tilting at cultures, tending to territories.

My father has some ballroom dancing certificates from the late 1960s. My mother has some local allotment prizes, won several decades later. A local paper has them playing a role in a picture of civic pride, albeit misidentified, misnamed.

Mobile/Chorus, Mobile/Ballroom, Golden Hour

Songs turned into *Chorus* (2006), a simple score for five voices with the single repeated lyric ‘golden’. *Chorus* has been performed by an ad hoc *Mobile Chorus* (2006/2014) in London and Montreal, with individuals singing along to instrumental parts, isolated by headphones yet tentatively unified in voice and movement through galleries and streets.

Similarly referencing flash-mobs and the momentary occupation of space through collective acts of engineered spontaneity, *Mobile Ballroom* (2006) was an invitation to ballroom-lovers to gather at rush-hour at Vauxhall tube station, and dance into the ‘Golden Hour’ – the soundtrack to a closing party, consisting of the opening and closing bars of every track in my parents’ record collection, simultaneously broadcast on the independent radio station ResonanceFM.

Golden (Notes) (2007)

An artist book bringing together documentation of various strands of *Golden*, including an annotated transcript of *Trialogue* (a conversation between Sonia Boyce, Irit Rogoff and Naomi Siderfin, accompanied and interrupted by my broken Cantonese translation). Several pieces of short fictive texts, by Gilane Tawadros, Rob Stone, and Mimi Lok, pick up on the project's themes and motifs, while playing on notions of critical distance, 'autobiography' and 'authenticity'.

Lean To (2000)

An installation at the East London Gallery, University of East London, with badges, postcards, doors, signs, spikes, shoes, lights, paper and Astroturf.

Lightness (2012)

A moving image and sound installation developed out of dialogues with athletes and scientists. *Lightness* follows the experiences of an elite, double-Olympian pole-vaulter along with a group of promising young hopefuls over eighteen months, to explore the cycles of physical and mental training, and the pole-vault itself as a metaphor for the human desire to defy gravity and take flight.

Monumental Bargain (1998)

A tower of SPSL-branded T-shirts to be customized with *97 Proofs* (1998).

NEWS / REEL (2005)

An artist book and audio/video work made following a short residency with the Media Archive of Central England. *NEWS* comprises a selection of cards from an idiosyncratic manual filing system inherited with some 30 years of regional news and programme footage dating from the late 1950s, whose curious classifications and prosaic descriptions suggest a subtext of preoccupations and elisions of the ‘foreign’ and ‘strange’. *REEL* draws on related footage to highlight dance as a form of cultural performance and consumption, in constructions of the ‘local’ and/or ‘foreign’.

Notes on Return (2003)

An early single-channel video made between London and Hong Kong. Three voices attempt to speak the English and Chinese translations of a poem by Bei Dao, called ‘Folding Procedure’; his bilingual collection, *Forms of Distance* (1994), a chance discovery in a charity shop. With the layered and recurring refrains on ‘return’ as the soundtrack, images shot in Hong Kong respond to the abstract images, rhythms and silences of the poem, as well as the stutterings and hesitations between language and place; an attempt at translating ‘by eye and by ear’ (Trinh 1992: 80).

RoCH Fans & Legends (2013–)

RoCH Fans & Legends features multi and single-channel moving image works for gallery and online (*Trailers, Trilogies, Covers I and II*); a concertina multiple over 8 metres in length (*RoCH Fan*); and an eponymous ebook, with texts by Alice Jim, Jean Hui Ng, Marquard Smith, Henry Tsang, Luke White, Andy Willis and Wayne Wong (2016).

RoCH Fans & Legends began in part as a response to the notion of the global archive, exploring the online traces of numerous film and television adaptations of Louis Cha aka Jin Yong's popular 'new *wuxia*' epic, *The Condor Trilogy* (1957–1963). 'RoCH' refers both to the second part of the trilogy, widely known as the *Return of the Condor Heroes* (1976b), and to its many spectacular returns over the last five decades (there have been some forty versions to date, primarily from Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and Singapore).

In 1976, Hong Kong saw the first television broadcasts of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (1976a) and *Return of the Condor Heroes* (1976b).

In 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston recalls her semi-fictive, tongue-tied younger self: 'What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?'

Wuxia's enduring and pervasive legends tend to romanticize and exoticize an imaginary 'China', along with notions of patriotism, heroism and love, central to which is the usually male knight-errant figure of the *xia*. Cinematically, *wuxia* is known transnationally; televisually, it is known translocally. Readings of so-called 'anti' or 'post-*wuxia*' (in the films of Stephen Chow Sing-Chi and Wong Kar-Wai for example) identify the potential in or through *wuxia* for alternate paradigms of abstraction, and a 'sensibility representative of the postcolonial mood in local transition' (Chan in Morris et al. 2005: 73).

RoCH Fans & Legends is concerned with the genre's recurring tropes, fantasies and archetypes, as well as its numerous translations and generations of 'bad copies'. From 1980s bootleg videos to online file-sharing platforms, can the mobilization of 'poor images' (Steyerl 2008) and 'pidgin translations' (lok 2006) generated and disseminated online and off, re-make or un-make *wuxia*, to reflect or produce a sensibility that speaks to the diasporic in perpetual translocal transition?

Six Women / Art Vapours (2015–)

A series of portraits and visual/text essay reflecting on the women featured in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), and the author of a letter found in the production archive: Anya Bostock, Eva Figes, Jane Kenrick, Barbara Niven, and Carola Moon, and (Mrs) SJ Arden.

Witness (1998)

A site-specific installation with sound and paper; a wordless counterpart to ninety seven over-determined proofs (see *97 Proofs* 1998).

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Figure 1: *Notes on Return* (2003).

Figure 2: *After Words* (2005).

Figure 3: *Golden (Vistas)* (2005).

Figure 4: *Golden (Ballroom)* (2006).

Figure 5: *Mobile Ballroom* (2006).

Figure 6: *Faster, Higher* (2008).

Figure 7: *Lightness* (2012).

Figure 8: *RoCH Fan* (2015).

Figure 9: *RoCH Trailers* (2015).

Figure 10: *RoCH Trilogies* (2015).